



## On Being a Comparative Europeanist

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**1.1** It is nearly 40 years ago now that I realized that my schoolboy training in other European languages gave me what marketing people would call my product differentiation among British sociologists (indeed, among the British population). And so I decided to specialize in the study of Western European societies. A very early opportunity came in 1973 when Alessandro Pizzorno came to Nuffield College, Oxford - where I was completing my doctorate on British industrial conflict - in search of someone to help him organize a project on the resurgence of class conflict in Western Europe. I became his assistant, which immediately introduced me to young Belgian, French, German, Italian and Dutch researchers whom I might never otherwise have met. There was not much comparative European empirical sociology around in those days, and what there was had mainly been written by Americans. So we were inventing a field. Also, both there and in later projects in the 1970s and 1980s, English had not quite become the academic *lingua franca*; we got along in a halting mixture of English, French and German, and gradually tried to add other languages to our repertoires.

**1.2** From these early contacts my European network spread, but there was further serendipitous help from the project with Pizzorno, produced by his personal generosity and the relative alphabetical positioning of C and P. Obviously my name should go first on the books that we produced from the project, he said (Crouch and Pizzorno 1978). This is not what an Italian professor would be expected to do for a mere assistant, and so outside this country (where people knew better) it was assumed that I had the same high stature in the UK as Sandro had in Italy and France. So I acquired an instant and totally unmerited reputation, which proved very helpful.

**1.3** A further serendipitous moment came through Santosh Mukherjee, a labour economist who sadly died 30 years ago while still a young man. I knew Santosh only socially, because our wives were friends, but one day around 1977 he invited me to lunch to meet a young German sociologist with whom he was working on the motor industry, because he thought we would get on well. This was Wolfgang Streeck. Over the succeeding decades he and I were to develop ideas together (see Crouch and Streeck 1997, 2006), sharing our growing European networks. In the 1990s he invited me to become external scientific member of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies at Cologne, of which he is joint director.

**1.4** Thus aided by chance, by the early 1980s I had my intellectual feet planted firmly the other side of the English Channel, and had made a conscious decision to develop further in that direction, culminating in a book that tried to cover all Western European industrial relations institutions (Crouch 1993). This has involved not only acquiring knowledge about other European societies; there has also been a need *not* to view the rest of Europe from an Anglophone perspective. 'The UK is just one of my *n*', I sometimes self-consciously say. One of my proudest academic moments was when Carola Frege (2007), in her study of national traditions of industrial relations research, listed me as one of only three researchers whose nationality could not be guessed from their writings (Streeck was a second).

**1.5** The best place in the world for a comparative Europeanist is the European University Institute at Florence. It was a place I used to love visiting, since that most European of Americans, Philippe Schmitter, first invited me there in 1983; but with which I never dreamt I might have a closer attachment. Then, one day in 1994, purely by chance, I noticed an advertisement for a chair in comparative European sociology there. The deadline was only two days away; I rushed an application together. Then began the decade that gave me my best chance thoroughly to Europeanize myself: translated out of any individual national context, part of no national system, with colleagues and doctoral students drawn from all Western and - very excitingly since the late 1990s - several Central and Eastern European countries, and beyond. All academic posts there are temporary, but I managed to stretch mine out to the maximum ten years.

**1.6** It was a double exile from British sociology, as my department was Social and Political Sciences, joint between politics and sociology. But I had already made that step in 1985, when I left the LSE department of sociology for Oxford, to take up a lectureship in sociology but a college fellowship in politics. At that

time not many sociologists were interested in the nexus of economic and political issues that had motivated the discipline in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The subject had self-defined itself as marginal and preferred to study marginal phenomena. When I was writing *Social Change in Western Europe* (1999), my publisher noted anxiously that the first half of the book dealt solidly with economic and occupational issues. He had been looking at sociology textbooks, and found that none of them had that kind of emphasis. I muttered something like '*tant pis*' and refused to change my ways; but the book never did as well in this country as in several others.

**1.7** Those of us who continued to follow the 'great tradition' tended to describe ourselves as political economists rather than sociologists, and were more at home in the company of comparative political scientists; but what we really wanted was an economic sociology, in particular one that was oriented to macro- as well as micro-issues.

**1.8** However, this problem of sociology's 'anti-economic turn' was not a uniquely British phenomenon; it existed in North America and Europe too - but there did seem to be more points of fight-back there. The US and German national sociological associations had economic sociology sections. Carlo Trigilia decided to re-animate the great tradition by writing a textbook – *Sociologia Economica* (1998) - that showed the connections between the works of contemporary economic sociologists and those of earlier generations. And he managed to have it translated into English. Then 2003 saw the birth of *Socio-Economic Review*, a genuinely inter-disciplinary journal, but one with its centre of gravity in sociology, which has rapidly risen to prominence. There are now moves to establish an economic sociology section of the European Sociological Association. Things have been getting much better for economic sociologists.

**1.9** And, coming back to the UK in 2005 I can now identify more than a handful of us here. We tend to cluster in business schools rather than pure sociology departments, and to be hidden under odd titles; but I sense that this too is changing. Behind this lie some important developments. During the lean years of the 1980s and 1990s British sociologists often found their role providing service teaching to a number of disciplines, from medicine to engineering. This reinforced the subject's inherent inter-disciplinarity, already there in its historical claim to be the generic social science. We now live in a period when social questions and problems clearly need to be tackled by economic, political, sociological, psychological and other approaches acting together, leaving behind the artificial straitjacket of subject boundaries. In principle this could presage an intellectual revolution as profound as that which has affected the chemical and biological sciences around the genome project. A sociology that is again willing to tackle economic and political issues is well equipped to play a leading part in such a process.

**1.10** It will be hampered by two awkward realities. First, economics will not relinquish its position as unapproachable queen of the social sciences, unwilling to communicate with others, despite the clear inadequacy of its theoretical paradigm to interpret the world as we know it. And second, now that university managements have learned how to game exercises like the RAE and REF, they very much need academics to stay in their little cost-centre and departmental boxes so that the games can be played. But the prize of a newly integrated social science is efficiently great to make a struggle against such obstacles well worthwhile.

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